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# THE BIBLICAL WORLD

CONTINUING

*The Old and New Testament Student*

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NUMBER I

THE mind of the Christian world will now turn toward that part of the sacred record which deals with the beginnings of things. With every decade of scientific work new discoveries are made and new statements are formulated. These old records have maintained their position and their influence side by side with all the progress which has been made in many centuries. In taking up again the consideration of their contents it is not inappropriate to discuss a few introductory questions. This discussion will be all the more in place in view of the series of articles to be published in successive numbers of THE BIBLICAL WORLD on the Early Stories of Genesis, that is, the stories included in the first eleven chapters.

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IF we make inquiry among those around us we find three attitudes of mind existing in reference to these stories. In the case of some there exists an unswerving faith in the literal accuracy and truth of these narratives. The source of this faith is not always clear, nor is the faith itself always an intelligent one. It exists, however, strong and undisturbed; for all will concede that a man's faith cannot be limited to subjects which he has himself investigated. In the case of another class there is an honest skepticism as to the historical or even the religious value of the records. Some do not believe in a special divine revelation. Some believe in such a revelation, but doubt whether

these records form a portion of it. There are some, also, who believe that a rational skepticism is better than a blind faith, especially if the blind faith undertakes to dictate opinions which have no real basis. The number of this second class is surprisingly large, but the largest of all is the third class, made up of those who are entirely indifferent alike as to the character and the contents of this wonderful book, the Book of Genesis. This indifference is due in part to the absurdities which men have been asked to believe concerning the book itself; in part to the many differences of opinion which exist concerning the most important questions relating to the book; in part, also, to the entire remoteness of the whole question.

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IN VIEW of the existence of these three attitudes, and in view of the necessity of adjusting one's work in such a manner as to meet the needs of all three classes, it may be asked, What should be the nature of work undertaken upon this subject? The answer to the question will be, that this work should include

1) An examination of the records themselves, together with all important scripture material which bears upon the same subjects, in the light of the acknowledged results of literary and historical criticism. This, to be sure, is the work of "higher criticism," but as every intelligent man to-day knows, without the methods of higher criticism no results of value may be secured.

2) The comparison of the results of this examination with the large amount of similar material to be obtained from stories outside of the Bible. It is known to all that there is a vast wealth of such material. All traditions contain some truth. This truth is to be extracted, estimated at its true worth, and considered in connection with the truth furnished us in the Bible.

3) After such an examination and comparison, the statement of the estimate which may be placed upon the biblical material. What is its value? How does it compare with the outside

material? What are the evidences of its superiority, if it is superior? No one will fail to recognize in doing such work either the difficulty of dealing with questions so remote and so far-reaching, or the uncertainty as to the reply which must be made to many questions, or the delicacy of presenting views new or varying from those commonly accepted.

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GOING now still further, what should be the purpose of the work thus outlined? This again is three-fold:

1) By destroying such conceptions introduced by tradition as have been proven to be erroneous and unfounded—in other words, by cleaning away the rubbish, to furnish a broader and firmer basis on which to rest a vital, and, what in these days is essential, an intelligent faith. Is there rubbish? one asks. Plenty of it. Will anything be left? another asks. Truth is sacred and inviolable.

2) By showing that, when scientifically interpreted, these narratives and institutions contain indisputable evidence not only of possessing great worth, but also of having a divine origin, to remove all ground for doubt, all basis for skepticism. It is the misinterpretation of the Bible that furnishes the occasion for all skepticism. The friends of the Bible have been its worst enemies. A faith in the Bible constructed upon a scientific basis will be acceptable to every one who will take the pains to look into it.

3) By pointing out the unique character and wonderful significance of these narratives and institutions, to arouse, if possible, a warm and living interest in place of the heartless indifference so widespread, an indifference more deadly than skepticism. The kind of influence in biblical work which prevails to-day is too frequently that which literalizes, shrivels, and so virtually destroys. Of that other kind which would revivify the old books and make them live again as they once lived in far back ages, there is a minimum.

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MUCH, as all will agree, turns upon the point of view from which the material is presented. We urge ourselves to throw

away all previous conceptions and yet the form of material is always colored by the spirit of those who present it. What now is an ideal point of view from which to study these questions? The writer can speak only for himself, and speaking thus the case stands as follows:

1) God, in his supreme wisdom, saw fit to make to man a special revelation. This is found first of all in the history which was divinely conducted to furnish the object lessons on the basis of which might be taught the principles of the divine revelation, and, still further, in the records which grow out of this history and which have in every respect the characteristics of the history.

2) The history of the records of the Book of Genesis, as well as of the books which stand in close connection with it, forming the hexateuch, are part of this special revelation.

3) This revelation, as it is taught by itself, was gradual and progressive. It was adapted to the capacities and modes of thought of the recipient, and therefore limited and presented in accordance with the principle of accommodation. Is it not true that a "revelation given more than three thousand years ago which should have comprised the science of the nineteenth century, would have been utterly confusing and perplexing?" Its supreme purpose is moral and spiritual, and there is not to be found from Genesis to Revelation any claim to a different purpose. Is its form perfect or imperfect? These words are always relative, never absolute. The records are imperfect from a literary point of view; the histories, imperfect models for the writing of history; the lives here sketched are, with one exception, imperfect lives; the philosophical discussions are in many cases unsatisfactory, failing as they do to settle the questions raised. But it is true that the history given us here is perfect in the sense that it was the best literature which almighty power, acting in consistency with other divine attributes, could inspire in the hearts of people dragged down with sin, and the literature is perfect in the sense that it is the best literature almighty power, acting in consistency with other divine attributes, could inspire in the hearts and minds of a people of Semitic blood living at that period of the world's history.

IN THE WORK proposed there are three steps to be taken :

1) The removal, so far as it is possible, of preconceptions and prejudices. This, it must be confessed, is something almost impossible of realization. There is, however, an openness of mind toward new truth, when it has been shown to be truth, for which all may work, and which, in a greater or less degree, may be secured by all.

2) The examination in a scientific way of the material under inspection, and a statement of the conclusions reached, together with the grounds for the same.

3) A hearty acceptance of these conclusions so far as they seem to be founded upon or to contain truth. It is here that we shall find the greatest difficulty. To change one's opinions, however strong the arguments for the change, requires a degree of candor and intellectual activity which few of us possess. Every effort put forth in this direction will make the next effort more easy.

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THE STATEMENTS made above apply more widely than to the Genesis material. As a matter of fact, the principles in accordance with which one investigates any portion of sacred writ will be the principles for the study of it in its entirety. The time is surely at hand for a fresh study, by many, of these records of the beginnings of things. The attention of the scientific and historical world is to-day directed towards Genesis. Can its divine origin be defended? The question is not what men living in the past centuries thought about this book, but rather what is its position when examined in the sunlight of modern research and discovery. Let us be careful on the one hand not to seek to treat outside material so as to force it into harmony with the biblical material; and, on the other hand, to treat biblical material in such a way as not to force it into harmony with the outside. Let each speak for itself, and if the agreement is not perfect, let us wait until light received either from God or from man, shall show us, what certainly in the end will be shown, that the Word of God, whether found in revelation or in nature is one word and always harmonious.